

**NARRATOR: Cromwell, Leo**  
**INTERVIEWER: Troy Reeves**  
**DATE: December 6, 2000**  
**LOCATION: Boise, Idaho**  
**PROJECT: Smokejumping/Forest Fire Fighting**

**Tape**

<b>Counter</b>	<b>Summary</b>
000	Interview began with a brief description of smokejumper reunions at McCall, Idaho, before the tape's introduction.
015	Cromwell grew up in Cascade, Idaho, and began fighting fire at the age of sixteen. He offered a brief overview of his life as a forest fire fighter and a smokejumper. He also talked about his education and his profession, which was teaching. He also described his parents' professions.
035	Cromwell enjoyed growing up in Cascade. He discussed the outdoor activities in and around this area. He decided to fight fires in the summer because he did not desire to work in the fields.
060	Cromwell fought fire for the Southern Idaho Timber Protective Association during his time in high school. He explained the make-up of this organization and the types of fires he fought for this group.
075	With prompting from the interviewer, Cromwell explained why he attended University of Idaho and why he decided to study education. By being a teacher, Cromwell could teach and smokejump.
090	Before becoming a smokejumper, Cromwell fought fire for the United States Forest Service. He explained a difficulty he had in becoming a smokejumper, because he had poor eyesight. In the 1960s, when Cromwell wanted to become a jumper, the job required its crew to have adequate eyesight without correction. Cromwell described how he passed the eye test.
125	Cromwell continued to talk about his eyes by explaining the difference between contacts and glasses for his smokejumping. He preferred contact lens to jump because, on occasion, the helmet would come off a jumper's head, which could cause his or her glasses to come off.
160	Before Cromwell became a smokejumper, he worked for the forest service on a hotshot crew. He explained what jobs he did as a member of this crew.
170	In the summer of 1966, Cromwell became a smokejumper. He reiterated his problems with his eyesight and his way to get around the test.

- 200 Cromwell only trained in McCall, Idaho; he jumped in Idaho City, Idaho. He described the physical training in the 1960s to become a jumper. He felt that the training in the 1960s was more difficult than today.
- 230 During his time as a “ned” [rookie smokejumper], the veteran smokejumpers performed initiations on the “neds.” Cromwell discussed these initiations and other aspects of being a first-year smokejumper. Cromwell felt that second or third year jumpers were tougher on the rookie than the veterans of the group.
- 300 Part of the physical training included running and hiking. Cromwell’s prior athletic training prepared him for this aspect of training. He did reiterate that physical training was difficult.
- 335 Back when Cromwell was a “ned,” he remembered being a “ned” for the whole year. He told a story about running an errand on a fire, because he was a rookie. On the way back from the errand, which was returning to camp to pick up more food, he and another rookie found a dead body on the trail.
- 380 On his first fire jump, Cromwell attempted it with two sprained ankles. He explained how he sprained both ankles and how concluded his first jump in this condition. Cromwell continued to describe minor and major injury that he has seen and that has befallen him. He discussed his only major injury; he broke both bones in his lower leg in 1994, when he overshot his mark on a landing. He talked about how he climbed up from his landing area to find help.
- 500 **END OF SIDE ONE**  
**TAPE ONE SIDE TWO**
- 000 Cromwell explained that this major injury ended his 1994 fire season. During the 1994 season, two McCall smokejumpers died on the Storm King or South Mountain fire in Colorado. Cromwell described his relationship with those two jumpers, Jim Thrash and Roger Roth. Cromwell continued to discuss his travels in 1994 fighting fire before his injury. 1994 was a busy fire season.
- 035 Cromwell loved being in Idaho City as a smokejumper. He talked about all of the activities that smokejumpers did during their non-fire time. On July 25<sup>th</sup> the smokejumpers held a Christmas in July party. Cromwell described that event and other community events or projects that the jumpers involved themselves in.

- 060 Cromwell talked about the physical landscape of the Idaho City smokejumping camp. Cromwell stayed in Idaho City as a jumper in both 1966 and 1967. Cromwell recalled 1966 as a busier fire year than 1967. In 1967 Cromwell remembered that the fires were bigger, so you stayed on them longer. After 1967 Cromwell moved to Fairbanks, Alaska, because a former Idaho City jumper told him that they paid jumpers overtime on big fires.
- 105 Idaho City in 1966 was a small, friendly town, according to Cromwell. He really enjoyed his time at Idaho City. He felt that currently Idaho City has become commercialized or artificial. With prompting from the interviewer, Cromwell remembered some specific older residents of Idaho City and some stories about those people.
- 160 Cromwell told the story of why, when he returned from Fairbanks, he did not return as a smokejumper in Idaho City. He married the daughter of the Idaho City smokejumper foreman, James "Smoky" Stover, and he could not return to the Idaho City camp, because of nepotism laws. He did not work at the McCall camp, because of a conflict between Idaho City smokejump leaders and McCall's leaders. Between 1969 and 1974, he worked for the Bureau of Land Management in Boise. He explained what he did for the BLM. Stover retired in 1973, so Cromwell returned to the smokejumpers in 1974.
- 205 The base moved from Idaho City to Boise in 1970, so Cromwell when he returned to jumping, he worked at the Boise base. He did not recall his first fire jump in 1974, after five-plus years, so he felt that it was easy to get back into the routine.
- 225 At Boise base Cromwell got along well with the other jumpers, but he felt it was not the same as being in Idaho City. It was more fun and more togetherness in Idaho City.
- 240 Cromwell described why Idaho City (and Boise) smokejumping bosses and McCall bosses did not get along. When the Boise base closed in 1979, Cromwell tried to bring the two bases together as a group, since they now all jumped from the McCall camp. Cromwell did state that some people at McCall, particularly Wayne Webb, had the respect of all jumpers, regardless of where their base camp was.
- 300 When the base camp moved from Idaho City to Boise, Boise jumpers trained in Boise, not McCall. Cromwell explained why the base closed in Boise in 1979. Other bases in the U.S. West closed because of consolidation measures by the forest service. He described the current situation or relationship between the smokejumpers at McCall, which is

located on the Payette National Forest, and the leaders on the Boise National Forest.

- 375 Cromwell furnished his opinions about leaving the base in Boise. Cromwell worked out of the McCall camp, but he did state that others from the Boise camp did not move to the McCall camp. He described some initial tensions between the McCall leadership and smokejumpers who arrived from Boise. Cromwell remembered that approximately ten jumpers moved from Boise to McCall. Cromwell detailed the status of other Boise jumpers who did not move to McCall.
- 445 When Cromwell jumped from McCall in 1980, he did not recall much change in the place from his earlier time in the town.
- 465 **END OF SIDE TWO**  
**TAPE TWO SIDE ONE**
- 000 [No introduction to tape two.] Cromwell recalled the set-up of the old McCall smokejumper camp. The current camp was built in the late 1980s. Cromwell discussed the stand-by shack that was at the airport before the whole camp moved to the airport in the late 1980s. He talked about what uses the old buildings are being used for today.
- 040 Cromwell felt everyone was happy when the base moved out to the airport. He also thought that the new base has worked quite well.
- 055 For the McCall smokejumpers, Cromwell has become the *de facto* historian. He explained his interest in history and Idaho history. He also described how his interest in history and smokejumping helped to foster his current interest in McCall's smokejumping history. The respect for past smokejumpers and Wayne Webb's help allowed Cromwell to create a book about the people who jumped from the McCall, Idaho City, and Boise camps.
- 120 During one smokejumper reunion, Cromwell asked for smokejumper to write their favorite story. He hoped to publish these stories as a book. He also included in his book about McCall smokejumpers the specific fires fought by the jumpers in the 1940s.
- 150 With prompting from the interviewer, Cromwell reiterated how the ten best smokejumping stories came about. He also described his interest and participation in the National Smokejumpers' Association.
- 185 At Cromwell's home he has put several smokejumping-related pictures on the walls. He explained where he obtained the pictures.

- 205 1997 was Cromwell's last year as a smokejumper. He explained why 1997 was his last year; he needed heart surgery after the 1997 fire season. Since then, he has tried to pass the physical requirements, but he has not accomplished the goals necessary to jump.
- 235 Cromwell has worked either at the smokejumper base in operations or a tanker base in McCall during the last three fire season. He would like to jump one more time.
- 265 There are many different reasons why Cromwell wants to jump again. He explained the reasons to the interviewer. He also talked about running in marathons before his operation. He would like to run in a marathon again. In responding to the interviewer's question, Cromwell described the training, both physical and mental, in running a marathon. He also talked about his current physical training to prepare for running and for, possibly, jumping.
- 325 Cromwell furnished his opinions on why former smokejumpers continue to keep in touch with each other. He felt that these older jumpers worked on this physically demanding job during the prime of their physical life. He also talked about the stories these jumpers tell and how they seem to mimic current smokejumping stories. He mentioned the number of people who attend the McCall reunion, which is held every five years. At this time Cromwell has wanted to be a part of the smokejumping history and a part of planning these reunions.
- 400 **END OF SIDE ONE**  
**END OF INTERVIEW**

## **NAMES AND PLACES INDEX**

Boise National Forest  
Boise, Idaho  
Bureau of Land Management  
Cascade, Idaho  
Catlin, Del  
*History of Washington County and Adams County*  
Idaho City, Idaho  
Lake Fork, Idaho  
McCall, Idaho  
Montoya, Robert  
Payette National Forest  
Proffer, Fred  
Roth, Roger  
Salmon River  
Southern Idaho Timber Protective Association  
Stover, James “Smoky”  
Thrash, Jim  
United States Forest Service  
University of Idaho  
Webb, Wayne  
*Who’s Who in Region 4 Smokejumping, 1943-1997* (book compiled by Cromwell)

**NARRATOR: Cromwell, Leo**  
**INTERVIEWER: Troy Reeves**  
**DATE: December 12, 2000**  
**LOCATION: Boise, Idaho**  
**PROJECT: Smokejumping/Forest Fire Fighting**

**Tape**

<b>Counter</b>	<b>Summary</b>
000	Introduction.
005	Cromwell's father was an edgerman for a lumber mill. He explained what his father's job entailed. Cromwell mentioned how dangerous his father's job was and how one of his cousins was killed while working as an edgerman.
030	Cromwell recalled how some lumber mills would help fight fires during the 1960s. Other than that he did not recall much of a relationship between smokejumpers and loggers.
050	During non-busy fire seasons, smokejumpers worked on many jobs. Cromwell described the myriad "projects" that smokejumpers worked on during a summer. He did mention that the types of "projects" changed during his time as a smokejumper.
105	Cromwell taught school in Boise, so he went directly from school to smokejumping. He explained what he did when he arrived at the smokejumper camp and how it has changed over time.
120	The experience gained from other veteran smokejumpers helped Cromwell as much as any academic training. He felt he looked to the squad leaders and other veterans as he began in smokejumping.
150	Cromwell worked on a hotshot crew before becoming a smokejumper. He talked about the differences between working on a hotshot crew and a smokejumper crew.
180	When he knew he would jump on the next fire, Cromwell checked his equipment to make sure everything was ready. He continued to explain the protocols that a smokejumper followed from the fire bell until he returned to the smokejumper base. Cromwell tried to think of all the possible "what ifs" regarding any specific fire. Cromwell described how jumpers, particularly when he began, packed out from a fire and how that changed over time. He finished by explaining what jumpers did when they returned to the base.

- 385 Fires burned differently during different times of day. Cromwell described a fires burning period, and he talked about how fire fighters knew and dealt with this information. Cromwell said that fire fighters tried to work on fires during the evening and night.
- 445 With prompting from the interviewer, Cromwell further described a rolling trench. These devices helped to stop a fire from spreading, particularly from starting below the crew.
- 482 **END OF SIDE ONE**  
**TAPE ONE SIDE TWO**
- 005 Smokejumpers had specific equipment dropped to them on a fire. Cromwell explained the types of equipments that they used to battle blazes. The biggest change over Cromwell's thirty years fighting fire was the improvement in chainsaws. Cromwell stated that fighting fire really had not changed considerably since he started in the 1960s.
- 045 Cromwell described how the pilot and smokejumpers still in the plane (the spotter or smokejumper in charge) dropped cargo near the fire. He mentioned how good pilots really helped the jumpers by dropping the cargo right where it needed to be dropped. Sometimes, however, the pilots could not or did not drop the cargo near the jump site.
- 100 With prompting from the interviewer, Cromwell continued to discuss the relationship between the pilots and the smokejumpers. According to Cromwell, most pilots knew what to do, so the spotter did not need to continually discuss the particular flight plan. He described the competition among the various pilots and some good-natured teasing between jumpers and pilots.
- 145 Some smokejumpers worked as spotters inside the airplane. Cromwell talked about the role of the spotter and the relationship between the spotter and the jumpers. He could not remember the first time he became a spotter, because on most occasions three people worked as a crew inside the airplane. He was the spotter on his 100<sup>th</sup> fire jump.
- 215 Cromwell described the milestones that jumpers can reach during their career, such as the 100<sup>th</sup> fire jump. He stated that some jumpers would return for one more year just to reach a milestone jump. Cromwell mentioned his 350<sup>th</sup> jump pin.
- 245 Certain jumps have stuck out in Cromwell's mind, particularly since he has worked on collating the smokejumper records. For example, he remembered jumping with new boots that blistered his feet. He also



recalled the Ship Island fire in 1979; he talked about it, because people died on the fire after the smokejumpers left.

- 295 On the Ship Island fire, Cromwell felt this fire's bosses did not let the fighters battle the blaze properly. He explained the circumstances of this fire, in detail. He talked about what happened when the fire fighter lost his life.
- 380 Cromwell discussed why smokejumpers do not like big fires. He felt that fires with multiple bosses could lead to multiple, conflicting orders to fight the fire. He recalled on specific example from the Ship Island fire.
- 430 Cromwell talked about changes in his thirty-plus years of fighting fire, including classes to fight fire and to be safe. He said that today the bureaucracy can make fighting fire more difficult. He like fighting fire during the 1960s, because they went out and put the fire out.
- 495 **END OF SIDE ONE**  
**TAPE TWO SIDE ONE**
- 000 [No introduction.] As Cromwell aged, he appreciated the advent of "long lines," which aided smokejumpers in taking their equipment from the fire. He also mentioned the changes in backpacks or carrying devices for the equipment that helped jumpers carry equipment and material.
- 020 Cromwell did not recall any specific busy fire years, although he thought that the 1990s were busy and the 1970s and 1980s were not so busy. He did say that some years in the 1970s and 1980s were busier fire season.
- 040 Cromwell talked about some "fun" fires, meaning fires that have some entertaining times while battling the blazes.
- 070 Cromwell offered his opinions about what jumpers do during their free time. He mentioned that current jumpers do a lot of outdoor activities, including rafting and running marathons. He did mention that younger smokejumpers do party in ways similar to the smokejumpers back the 1940s and 1950s, but today's smokejumpers start at a later age (25-30) than old-time smokejumpers, who were between 18 and 22 when they started.
- 130 Cromwell discussed the "Big Flip," which is an end of the year ritual at the McCall smokejumper camp. It involved flipping of a coin. Jumpers put a certain amount of money into a pool, and the winner (the person who kept flipping heads) won all of the money. He also talked about how jumpers always flipped a coin to decide who would do some undesirable chore, such as paying for dinner or doing extra work. Cromwell told a

story about one particular “Big Flip” that ended up with Cromwell, who was a “ned,” and two veteran smokejumpers.

- 235 The Mann Gulch fire of 1949 was a memorable event in smokejumper history. Cromwell discussed what he knew about that event, including going to a dedication ceremony for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the event. He talked about a couple of different occasions when he narrowly escaped a fire.
- 280 Cromwell explained why turning back into a fire could save a fire fighter’s life. He did state that it depended on the type of fire and fuel type of the forest.
- 300 Cromwell offered his opinion of female smokejumpers and the first women, Deanne Shulman, he worked with in McCall in the early 1980s. He was quite impressed with Shulman and her work on fires.
- 360 Cromwell taught school when not smokejumping. He felt the two jobs were complete opposites. He told a story about missing the first day of school, because he tried to fight one more fire on Labor Day weekend (his school started the Tuesday after Labor Day). He ended up fighting a fire in Montana and did not return to Boise until the second day of school.
- 430 The smokejumper base moved from Idaho City to Boise in winter 1969. Cromwell discussed why the base moved and how it affected Idaho City and the smokejumpers.
- 490 During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Cromwell worked in the summers for the Bureau of Land Management at the Boise Interagency Fire Center. He discussed what he did for the BLM.
- 500 **END OF SIDE ONE**  
**TAPE TWO SIDE ONE**
- 000 Cromwell continued his discussion about his BLM work.
- 010 Cromwell offered his thoughts about how smokejumping has fit into his life. He felt so much closer to smokejumpers than to the people he worked with at school.
- 030 **END OF SIDE TWO**  
**END OF INTERVIEW**

**NAMES AND PLACES INDEX**

Boise Interagency Fire Center (now National Interagency Fire Center)  
Boise, Idaho  
Bureau of Land Management  
Chamberlain Basin (Idaho)  
Cramer, John  
Dow, Jerry  
Idaho City, Idaho  
Jackson, Reid  
McCall, Idaho  
Montoya, Robert  
Ogawa, Jerry  
Parrot Creek (Idaho)  
Ship Island fire (Idaho, 1979)  
Shulman, Deanne  
Stover, James “Smoky”  
Tamarack, Idaho  
United States Forest Service